

**Title:**

Autoethnography as Pedagogy: Writing the “I” in IR

**Abstract:**

While autoethnography has established itself as a research method, its utility in the classroom remains under explored. Many writers use autoethnography to describe their roles as educators and students but far fewer detail an actual autoethnographic course. I analyze a highly original MA level class on autoethnography in international relations. Students report that the course had the “potential to revolutionize” learning and teaching as a means of questioning themselves in relation to the social and political worlds they studied. Autoethnography has transformed the way we approach ourselves and our research; it is now time we let it change how we teach.

One ought to recognise that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language.

– George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language* (1946, p. 265)

As a teenager, I used to get up at 4.15am to write spy novels. The novels were not very good. I had heard that my favourite author at the time had adopted this habit to take advantage of the morning quiet before phone calls and other obligations interrupted his flow of writing. At 14, I had no such interruptions. But the habit had several grown up effects on me. One, I learned to love of coffee. More importantly, it sparked an interest in the relationship between politics and storytelling. Each dawn I placed my characters into imagined communities of intrigue and danger, combining real life news with the freedom of a teenage imagination. The act of writing helped make distant events seem real; it was a way of relating personalities and issues which I could not fully understand to my own hopes and fears. Moreover, it was exceedingly fun. Writing was an escape which I longed for each morning.

Sadly, overtime I lost my love for writing. The blank page no longer provided a sense of exhilarating freedom; instead, it became an obligation to fill. After nine years of university education, I learned to write in a different way, my creativity sanitized, my language calcified. Here I can identify with Roxanne Doty when she writes about the ‘discipline of the discipline’ – the slow often unnoticeable slipping away of one’s own voice into an abyss of academic jargon (Doty, 2010, p. 380). I learned to write for graduate assignments and then for academic journals, certain that I was gaining something but unaware of what I was losing. I am somewhat resentful about this process – about not seeing it coming and letting it drain the fun from writing for so many years. Like Doty, I am equally troubled that I failed to fully realize the consequences as I passed this habit on to my students – who learn fairly quickly that a dry, soulless and supposedly

objective voice is pretty much a requirement for a distinction. I wanted to try and get away from this for my own sake as much as for my students.

Autoethnography offers a way out of this singular form of writing. Yet while autoethnography has established itself as a viable research method, its utility in the classroom remains under explored. This is unfortunate as autoethnography offers not only novel forms of writing, it also provides a way to expand our definition of what constitutes the political and to connect the private troubles of individuals to public issues and to public responses to those troubles (Denzin, 2014). The paper contributes to the literature on autoethnography in education by describing and analyzing a highly unique MA level class in international relations (IR) at [*a Russell Group university in northern England, to be identified after peer review*]. While a number of courses offer autoethnographic components, entire classes dedicated to autoethnography are less common. The class cited here is, as far as I know, the only one of its kind in political science and international relations. After reviewing the literature on autoethnography in both education and IR, I present the details of the class and student evaluations of it. The course produced the best student writing I have ever encountered. Students approached the freedom offered by autoethnographic writing with both trepidation and intellectual excitement; in the end many reported that the course had changed their views of writing, politics, and in some cases themselves. I conclude by discussing the value of autoethnography as a form of pedagogy.

### **Autoethnography in Learning and Teaching**

Autoethnography seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to critique political and cultural beliefs and practices (Adams, et al., 2015). As readers of *Qualitative Inquiry* will know, autoethnography has become an established, if at times contested,

method across the social sciences. Yet the full potential of autoethnography, as a method in learning and teaching, has yet to be realised. This is not because autoethnography is not discussed vis-a-vis education and pedagogy. It is. However, the vast majority of studies provide autoethnographic accounts of educative processes rather than analysis of autoethnography courses. Hayler (2011) for example seeks to understand how narratives of experience form the professional identity of university-based teachers. Many report the frustrations caused by gaining approval from Institutional Review Boards for autoethnographic work (Forber-Pratt, 2015; Wall, 2008) while others provide personal stories of their role as educators (Armstrong, 2008; Ernest & Vallack, 2015; Granger, 2011; Pennington, 2007; Quicke, 2008; Trahar, 2013; Wilson, 2011). A common theme runs through much of this literature, exemplified well in the volume by Meneley and Young (2013). The authors here attempt to make sense of the ways in which their pedagogical and intellectual pursuits are enabled or (usually) frustrated by social-cultural and political structures both within and external to their institutions. In this way, autoethnography functions as a kind of a salve, a form of therapy to make sense of the constraints that often contradict their own beliefs about teaching.

Few writers go beyond their own quotidian routines as teachers to describe autoethnography as an educational method in its own right. While Pichon (2013) proposes the adoption of autoethnography in a research methods class, the actual use of autoethnography is described by Cook (2012) who explored student reactions to autoethnography as an assessment and learning tool in a class on sociology and the body. Cook required her students to combine a personal, reflective analysis of a bodily experience with relevant sociological literature. She writes that students felt the assignment enhanced their critical thinking on the relationship between their

lived experiences and the social. A few students noted that the assignment ‘helped them deal with some unresolved feelings’ and anxieties of their own bodies (Cook, 2012, p. 277). While Cook relied on a traditional essay format, Alexander (2013), in a performance studies class, encouraged students to use poems, dance and song in order to provide a critical articulation of a ‘kernel moment’ in their lives. This approach permits much but also comes with risks, not least of which is the obligation of the educator to embody the method themselves, putting their own narratives in front of students. Hughes and Pennington (2017) and Tombro (2012) offer textbooks for students and educators, with samples of student work and detailed guidance on methodological processes involved in teaching and writing autoethnography.

While there are other studies which propose using autoethnography (Pichon 2013) or adopt versions of biographical learning (Goodson & Gill, 2014), the authors cited above seem to be rare examples of autoethnography *in* the classroom rather than autoethnographic writing *about* the classroom. One reason for this is that classes focusing on autoethnography are not particularly common. Several courses, particularly in drama, cultural studies, sociology and research methods have autoethnographic assignments built in but even these remain exceptional. There has yet to be any work investigating the method as a pedagogical tool in political science or international relations. This is unfortunate since it is often claimed that the value of autoethnography as a research method is to bring the political to the fore and to better understand how personal narratives are implicated in political worlds beyond what is commonly assumed at first glance. The absence of autoethnography in teaching politics or international relations is despite the fact that autoethnographic research has been an emerging interest in these fields.

Over a decade ago, Burnier (2006) accurately claimed that political science excluded the personal from scholarly research and writing. Today the situation is mixed in that political science has been far slower to embrace the narrative turn compared to international relations. This is not surprising given that IR has been deeply influenced by a generation of work in post colonialism, feminism and poststructuralism. The range of issues covered by IR autoethnographers spans widely from early work on nuclear defense (Cohn, 1987), the gendered aspects of war (Elshtain, 1987) to border crossings, landscapes and conflict (Lowenheim, 2014; Khosravi, 2010) to issues of race, orientalism, family violence, and sexual identity (see the entries within Inayatullah, 2011; Inayatullah and Dauphinee, 2016). This work shares the same broad concerns as autoethnography more generally, including concerns over epistemic privilege, the need for reflexivity of the self, and the importance of the role of emotion.

Arguably, the most influential autoethnographic work in IR has been Elisabeth Dauphinee's *The Politics of Exile* (2013a). Dauphinee tells the story of a university professor who has written a book on Bosnian war crimes. The narrator, who is never named but assumed to be Dauphinee, hires a Serbo-Croatian translator, Stojan, to help proofread her manuscript, which is described as a rather traditional, dry academic treatise. A friendship develops between Stojan and the professor as he tells her stories of how the war impacted his family. During their conversations, the narrator realises that her scholarly account cannot do justice to the complexities of the lived experience of war. Her sense of inadequacy grows as she begins to realise that Stojan is guilty of war crimes himself, leaving the narrator to doubt the entire edifice in which her life's work had thus far been built. Dauphinee's use of autoethnography represents both a method to describe her problems in research and an attempt to move beyond those problems. The book illustrated how IR can be a creative, aesthetic political practice that disrupts the conventional orthodoxy of

supposedly objective social science (Edkins, 2013). It is for these reasons that *The Politics of Exile* was a core text in the autoethnography class under investigation in this paper.

### **“The ‘I’ in IR”**

I drew inspiration from Lowenheim (2010) in naming my MA course “The ‘I’ in IR: Autoethnography and Political Storytelling”. The seminar ran for two years from 2014 to 2016 and was only rested when I went on research leave. In total, 34 students registered for the class out of a combined two year cohort of 89 students. The students’ gender was evenly split; there were 7 international students – meaning, in this context, students from outside of the UK or EU. Classes were two hours in length and ran for 11 weeks each spring. In advertising the class, I used the example of walking into a supermarket to help illustrate this point: Do we frequent superstores knowing their impact on local retailers? Do we buy locally sourced to? Do we boycott products from certain countries because of perceived injustice in their foreign policies? Rarely do we interrogate our daily actions with these questions in mind. In getting students to understand how we are inevitably complicit in structures of oppression and resistance I hoped to broaden their definition of the political and complicate their notions of the demands and limits of responsibility. I also sought to introduce students to new ways of reading and writing political science and international relations.

I began the course with the work of Dan McAdams (1993), who is not generally associated with autoethnography yet whose writing speaks directly to the aims and methods of such. McAdams is well known in psychology and human development for formulating a life-story theory of human identity, which argues that modern adults provide their lives with a sense of unity and purpose by constructing and internalizing self-defining life stories or personal myths. According

to McAdams, we construct these myths to bring the different aspects of our self and our scattered experiences into a purposeful whole, integrating our remembered past, perceived present and anticipated future. McAdams writes, “If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too must come to know my own story. I must come to see in all its particulars the narrative of the self – the personal myth – that I have tacitly, even unconsciously, composed over the course of my years.” (McAdams, 1993, p. 11). Following McAdams, I asked students to think of their lives as if it were a book: How would they organise the narrative? What tone and imagery would they adopt and how would this change over time and place? Working in pairs, students explored a variety of memories, including their peak and nadir experiences and key turning points in their lives. This led to more specific discussions of their earliest political memories and how those memories shaped their interests, beliefs and values.

In the next part of the course, we read examples of autoethnographic IR with commentaries on the value and limits of autoethnography and narrative methods. Unsurprisingly the highly readable style of these texts proved to be immensely popular. It was a revelation to students that serious academic work did not have to be hard going and full of jargon. However, the idea that such work was easier to read was somewhat belied by the diversity of views in interpreting the substantive content of the texts. This stemmed in part from the differences between traditional social scientific writing and the narratives contained in autoethnographies (Inayatullah, 2013). Students are used to reading journal articles and book chapters that explicitly state their aims and provide substantive closure. *The Politics of Exile*, as with many autoethnographies, revealed itself not through careful, rationale argument but through the feelings, gestures, and conversations of characters. As Inayatullah writes, the political message was suggestive, giving



“the responsibility of closing on an interpretation to the reader rather than the writer” (2013, pp. 339). These “character-effects” create a resemblance between the character and the reader, an emotional connection and identification which encourages us to forget that the characters are not living human beings (Bal, 2009). Thus, while students enjoyed the freedom and readability of the text they also struggled over the meaning behind certain scenes and character intentions. They also debated what significance the stories held – not only for IR but for wider issues of trust, responsibility and empathy in human relationships.

This part of the course helped identify one of the key values of autoethnography as a pedagogical method. It enabled students to escape the confines of standard academic work by cutting a clearer path to identification with and responsibility for the Other. In the case of Dauphinee’s book, character effects disrupted our understanding of what a “war criminal” was, allowing us to get inside their thoughts and feelings in a way that promoted sympathy and understanding. Importantly, this brought students closer to lived experience of a key problematic in IR as they wrestled with the difficulty of enacting judgement, the complexity of ascribing blame, and the challenge of relating to difference. Much of the text involved face-to-face conversations between the narrator and her translator. It is no surprise then that Dauphinee refers several times to Emmanuel Levinas as his work shows how we are constituted in and by our relationship to the Other. According to Levinas, the self, without choice, is always infinitely responsible to the Other. This is the potential of autoethnography – for if “we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives”, we require a method in which to embrace our vulnerability in the face of structures and persons we may never know (MacIntyre, 1985, p.213)

The final part of the module focused on methodology and on providing students with a toolkit of approaches and concepts that would help them with their assessment. I assigned a selection of

primary texts in autoethnographic methods (e.g. Chang, 2008; Denzin, 2014; Ellis, 2004; Muncey, 2010; Spry, 2011). If interpreting autoethnographic stories posed unique challenges and opportunities, writing one was certainly no different. For the final essay, described below, students were encouraged to remember the minutiae by drawing from blogs, journals, daily planners, social media data, old photographs, family albums, anything which could help shed light on their relationship with the issue they chose to write about. It was perhaps inevitable that most students relied on past memories for their data. A few students worried about the issue of memory bias since, as Freeman aptly notes, writing about experience changes that lived moment into this written one and in the process risks distortion (Freeman, 2015). This is normally dealt with in autoethnography by re-defining the notions of validity to ask if a story has verisimilitude and whether it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible (Adams, et al., 2015). I took the view, following Dauphinee, that one could argue that autoethnography presents a more honest methodological approach for it “opens space for the reader to see the intentions – and not just the theories and methodologies – of the researcher” (Dauphinee, 2010, p. 813).

Students were given three choices for the 4,000 word assessment. These were to either write an autoethnography, critique autoethnography as a method, or critique examples of autoethnographic IR. 31 of 34 students opted to write their own autoethnography. Although a number of students initially thought the assignment would be the easiest paper of their MA to write, many reported midway through the semester, that they had become “freaked out” by it. Students were excited and scared in equal measure by the freedom to pursue any topic they wished, including and perhaps especially themselves, and to experiment with alternative forms of writing. To help offset their anxieties, I provided additional marking criteria, summarised below,

beyond the department's usual rubrics. I also encouraged students to examine their own writing styles and methods rather than merely fall into a habitual pattern. What time and under what conditions did they write best? What emotions or bodily reactions did the prospect of writing instil in them before starting? The goal was to help them push the limits of what they thought was possible in writing for a MA level work.

I followed three broad criteria in evaluating the papers. First, in seeking to avoid self-indulgent personal stories, I required the assignment to be guided by a socio-political problem and not merely a topic that the student found interesting but which held no further meaning or relevance beyond themselves (Brigg and Bleiker, 2010). In keeping with the view that the concepts of "domestic" and "international" are false binaries, I permitted students to write about an issue in either area. The most common themes were discrimination and justice in gender relations; orientalism and overseas volunteer experiences; and immigration.

Second, students were asked to be visible, active, and reflexively engaged in the text, an audience to their own experience (Adams, et al., 2015). Papers were meant to demonstrate the author's subjectivity within the text by interrogating their own position, their assumptions, actions, values and beliefs in relation to their chosen issue (Denzin, 2014). This represents a core element of autoethnography: rather than erasing the traces of the author, as is customary in the social sciences, the result of an autoethnographic investigation must expose and retrace some of the most important ways in which the author's experiences and faculties came into play.

Third, the papers were expected to emphasis the relational (Brigg and Bleiker, 2010). It is common to say that we are social agents enmeshed in a social world. The assessment required students to push beyond this truism to connect their experiences with wider social issues, to

recognise that “the ‘I’ has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation – or set of relations – to a set of norms” (Butler, 2005, p. 8). An individual’s case history or life story is rarely only just; autoethnography is a means in which to record the effects of a particular stage of history upon an individual. Denzin (2003) uses Sartre’s concept of the universal singular to help illustrate this point. The autoethnographer functions as a single instance of more universal social experiences, reflecting the universal features of their time while, conversely, the universals are realised concretely and singularly by individuals. As Denzin puts it, “The autoethnographer inscribes the experiences of a historical moment, universalizing these experiences in their singular effects on a particular life” (Denzin, 2003, p.268).

The vulnerability inherent, indeed required, of autoethnography raises significant ethical issues regarding the authors and those they portray (Lapadat, 2017). Students were asked to share their paper and seek the consent of anyone who was identifiable within the work. This was not as hard as it seemed as in most cases those who were named were family members or close friends whom students could approach for permission. What concerned me more was the ethics of requiring students to self-reflect, disclose and discuss their life experiences for academic assessment. This is captured well by one student, Ornela, who wrote,

“I recognise the distress in putting all of my insecurities on display for someone else to read, critique and revalue. The word ‘I’ is intimidating to me and I cannot distinguish whether this process is liberating or just another format of oppression where my thoughts and emotions have to be structured in tandem with someone else’s theories.” (Krasniqi, 2015)<sup>1</sup>

As this student demonstrates, it would be false to assume that the person pronoun is necessarily freeing. Although in this case, as we will see in the following section, Ornela's reservations did not prohibit her from producing a powerful autoethnographic essay. However, we – as educators and as researchers – cannot assume to know how students will perceive the opportunity/burden of being asked to write about themselves. It could, as it did for many, be an inspiration; it could equally serve to reinforce vulnerabilities and power relations between academic staff and, in most cases, younger students. This is the primary reason why I offered students the option of critiquing autoethnography rather than writing one as I did not want to obligate students into divulging themselves or to feel that they were being judged, that the value of their lives were somehow reflected in the grade they received. I also shared a considerable part of my own narrative with the class regarding my own insecurities over the creative process and the impact of growing up in a divided family (Cook, 2014; Adams, 2008).

In the end, the course produced some of the best writing I have ever encountered in any assessment. The reasons for this, and the reasons why autoethnography offers such a valuable pedagogical method, are reflected in the evaluations of the class.

### **“The Potential to Revolutionize”: Evaluations of an Autoethnographic Course**

In this section I draw from student evaluations and excerpts of their work to show why autoethnography, and autoethnographic writing in particular, is critical to student learning. The module was evaluated using EvaSys Survey Automation Software. Nearly three quarters of students (25/34) taking the class completed the evaluation; respondents remained anonymous. The class was highly popular with 84% (29/34) of the students ranking the seminar a maximum score of 5/5 for overall satisfaction (EvaSys, 2015-16).

Many commented that the class ‘did not resemble’ any other offering they encountered at the masters or undergraduate level (EvaSys, 2016). One student felt that autoethnography, as a teaching method, had “the potential to revolutionize the teaching/learning experience” given its emphasis on the “freedom to discover and most importantly, question aspects of yourself.” (EvaSys, 2015) The value of the course was articulated well by another respondent who wrote,

“I think the creativity that this module allowed for made the learning experience more tailored to myself rather than mechanical understandings of abstract concepts. It allows you to discover different ways of understanding yourself... [I]n education, I don't think that there is enough emphasis on personal reflexivity or allowing you to place yourself within existing knowledge. Learning can often times be quite a rigid process where one framework has become the blueprint for learning for all. This module tried to mitigate this (often) constricted practice by making it allowable for you to be your own source of knowledge rather than merely emulating it.” (EvaSys, 2015)

The relevance of critical pedagogy is evident here in Friere’s (1996) contention that learning and being are inseparable. Critical pedagogy, as autoethnography, emphasises that learning is not detached from our social reality, but instead it allows us to “situate a mundane personal life within the socio-political arena in a creative and transformative dialectic” (Goodson and Gill, 2014, p. 96). Critical pedagogy seeks emancipation through an awakening of the critical consciousness, allowing students to recognize connections between their individual problems and experiences and the social contexts in which they are embedded. Seen in this way, teaching is an inherently political act inseparable from issues of social justice. At one level this has implications for our forms of assessment as it questions the relevance of exam based courses in an era where information is readily available at one’s fingertips. Are we merely reproducing

individuals who will pass exams by giving the ‘right’ answers to well-rehearsed questions? If learning does not confront what is real for students, then there will be no true engagement, and no possibility of awakening (Forrest, et al, 2012). This is deeply important for IR since it is not hard to locate structures of oppression in the violence of wars or in gender discrimination; it is much harder to awaken to the implicit processes which accompany what we know and how we view ourselves in relation to established norms and traditions (Forrest et al, 2012; Friere, 1996).

A number of students noted how writing allowed them to see their stories as part of a wider canvass of IR/others. As one put it, politics was “involved in our real life.” (EvaSys, 2016). Another commented that the class showed them how “my own experiences are linked to international politics and political themes in a more subtle way than I had realised... I gained a real appreciation of just how important the subjective experience is to understanding ‘big’ politics” (EvaSys, 2015)

If it is true that we can know ourselves only incompletely, it is also the case that we exist only in relation to a broader social world that has always preceded us and already shaped us in ways we cannot grasp. Or as Lowenheim puts it “By understanding oneself as a product of a certain culture and a certain structure of knowledge/power, à la Michel Foucault, one could be more aware of questions of reproducing such structures, as well as of one’s possible role in transforming them.” (Lowenheim, 2010, p.1026). For Butler, this constitutes a form of ethics: becoming critical of norms under which we are asked to act, but which we can never fully choose (Butler, 2005). Autoethnography as pedagogy enables students to create and share an ethics of vulnerability, humility, and ethical responsiveness. This may be an obvious point for those committed to autoethnography as research. It is less obvious how we extend these insights

to students in a way that motivates them to act rather than paralyses them with overwhelming burdens.

The key to extending this insight to students, I suggest, lies in a certain form of writing wherein the writer's voice "pervades and situates the analysis and objective, distancing rhetoric is renounced" (Doty, 2004). Students felt that "in this assignment what I actually wrote was important, rather than writing to appease a lecturer's view or reproducing a tired argument" (EvaSys, 2015). Another commented that, "The best feature was probably the freedom of writing it allowed for students. It gave me a lot of creative control in writing and this was something that I thought was fundamental to inspiring me to look further into the readings." (EvaSys, 2015)

Here, rather than shutting down the educative process, giving students greater control of what they studied and how they wrote about it, had the effect of encouraging further engagement. Moreover, autoethnography, with its focus on the emotions and inner world of the individual, enables us to *feel* IR, giving individuals the right and the space to tell *their* version of the international (Lowenheim, 2010). In this sense it has much in common with Billig's call for writers to populate their text, to write about people rather than things (Billig, 2013). Billig argues that we should describe (and thereby imagine through our writing) what people do, feel, think. When writers nominalise, they not only hide the agents but turn human actions into things – impersonal, inanimate, capable of being amassed. In the process, other motivations and impulses are ignored or marginalized, left to the poets and the novelists. Autoethnography helps students utilise creativity without conjuring up yet another variant to add to an already exhausting list of hyphenated -isms, -izations and -ifications (Billig, 2013; Badley, 2017).



The intellectual value of personal writing in a politics module is illustrated well by two student examples. Ornela, cited above, drew on du Bois' concept of 'double-consciousness' to discuss her experience, as a female Muslim student in Britain. Drawing on her memory of reading World War I era poems in an English literature class, Ornela discussed how, despite her own background, she learned to distance herself from herself given the prevalence of an anti-Muslim discourse at the time.

"In the process of writing this essay, I have become intensely aware of my internalising practices. I had internalised this wider Islamophobia and found myself unable to empathise with bodies that did not fit picture of the dominant majority. It was a variation of self-hatred where the discourse on Muslims and 'others' was so pervasive, I was no longer able to see the humanity in those bodies or my own. I engaged in silencing myself for fear of being labelled extreme." (Krasniqi, 2015).

Another student, Annie, wrote of the 'lad culture' of sexism and sexual harassment that characterises many UK universities.

"What was clear, though, was that this behaviour was a problem. Through its performance and online discursive construction, feelings of insecurity and alienation were being produced every day. For me, this had meant accepting certain behaviours as normal, such as being groped on a night out. These instances, laughed off as 'banter', have often been dismissed as unimportant for politics. I do not believe this to be the case. Instead, these everyday practices have reified gendered stereotypes and power hierarchies" (Preston, 2016).

It is difficult imagining students writing such passages for a standard, detached essay assignment. The writing for the course was not only more personal. Students actually cared more

about what they were saying. In retrospect, this is hardly surprising. When we accept things like intuition, bodily sensations and felt experience as legitimate data, it is bound to affect our choice of words and the way we put these words on paper (Doty, 2010). The process of autoethnographic writing allowed students to articulate aspects of themselves that they had not previously explored or even felt – “an internalising practice”, in Ornela’s words. This illustrates the difficulty we face in a constant struggle between a critical relation to the truth regime – in these cases “reified stereotypes” about gender or ethnicity – and giving a truthful account of the self. This is when Butler urges us to risk ourselves as these students have done. In so writing, they not only disclosed themselves, they have also “acted on the schemes of intelligibility which govern who will be a speaking being, subjecting them to rupture” and contesting their hegemony (Butler, 2005, p.132).

Not all essays explored such sensitive topics. One student wrote their assessment as a conversation between himself and his foreign language instructor to explore the humbling nature of a British man trying to learn German, and in the process, acquire a ‘European identity’. Others used photographs and diaries to explore their experience of international travel. For many students the course was not a limited, one-off exercise. Ornela indicated that two years after the class, the type of reflection encouraged by it continued to have an impact on her (Krasniqi personal communication, 2017). At least three students went on to use autoethnography in their MA dissertations. If we – as educators – claim to promote student voice, then autoethnography cannot be limited to our research alone. It is time to more fully bring autoethnography into the classroom as a pedagogical method and form of assessment.

### **Autoethnography as Pedagogy**

Despite the success of the course, there are a number of ways I would seek to improve upon it. Students indicated, for example, that they would have liked guidance on allowing a wider and more innovative selection of digital media to be submitted for the assessment. Beyond this, I regret not exploring some of the conceptual issues regarding self-knowledge and reflexivity at the heart of autoethnography. Here I refer to the ontological tensions between autoethnography's anti-objectivist stance of a multi-layered self and its reliance on forms of autobiography, underpinned by more traditional concepts of a unitary self as the primary source of knowledge (Hamati-Ataya, 2014; Neumann, 2010).

As I have demonstrated in this paper, there are several ways in which autoethnography as a method of classroom instruction – not merely a method of writing about the classroom – is valuable. It promotes students' own self-awareness of their positionality, of how their beliefs and values are created vis-à-vis relationships to others and to wider of norms and traditions. Students ranked the course highly as they valued the freedom it offered, the imperative of self-reflexivity, and the insights it yielded into how their own lives intersected with the “big politics” of international relations. Perhaps above all, the class offered students a legitimate way of reading and writing material that was academic in nature but not stultifying. Importantly, this included not only texts in political science and IR but also a way into teaching qualitative methods, a topic which often presents many challenges for both students and those who teach them. Studies suggest that students tend to grasp research methods better when faced with active, experiential learning opportunities (Cooper, Chenail & Fleming, 2012). Autoethnography allows for this and in the process helps illustrate the absurdity of papers where the researchers themselves are often grammatically absent from methods sections, implying that their persona had no effect on results (Billig, 2013).

Autoethnography as pedagogy, then, challenges the pedagogical myth, “the parable of a world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid” (Rancière, 1991, p, 6). According to Rancière, this myth is the bond of social order, the assumed incapacity of the many to understand, which ensures that emancipation will always rest in the hands of the knowing and learned. The way to challenge the hegemony of this pedagogic relation is through an alternative model of intellectual capacity, which destroys the distance of inequality (Lambert, 2012). For Rancière, everyone must be considered to have equal intellectual capacity; emancipation is thus “each man becoming conscious of his nature as an intellectual subject” (Rancière, 1991, p. 35). Autoethnography helps to break down Rancière’s myth for it democratizes knowledge and asserts the value of everyone’s story as a means of challenging prevailing orders.

However, in order to do accomplish this we need to intensify efforts to bring autoethnography to our students. If, in our teaching, we can stop “our deliberate suppression or erasure of concrete human connections towards our objects of knowledge” (Mupiddi, 2013, p.310), perhaps students will “see the connections between their own lives and the social and political worlds they study. They may embrace their own uncertainty not as evidence of their failure, but as a critical part of their own curiosity about themselves and about the world” (Dauphinee, 2013b, p.358). This is the promise of autoethnography for students – to identify the social conditions under which they live, a pre-requisite for giving an account of themselves, as Butler argues. After all, how can our students know what to do until they know what stories they are a part of?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Written consent has been obtained to use and name identifiable student work in this paper. I am grateful to Ornela and Annie for their permission to quote excerpts from their essays.

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